

Gazette Chicago » New riverfront park considered for site of shuttered Fisk power plant

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By Robert Kingett

The City is considering the site of the old Fisk Generating Station on the Chicago River in Pilsen, a coal-fired electric generating plant that closed in 2012, for a new park, called the Throop Street River Park.

After Mayor Rahm Emanuel introduced the proposal, the City Council unanimously voted to supply \$40,000 in funding to plan the park on a 1.5-acre vacant portion of the former Fisk site in the Pilsen Industrial Corridor.

The \$40,000 will come from open space impact fees (OSIF). The OSIF program collects fees associated with constructing new residential projects to apply to surrounding neighborhoods' open space needs. Project leaders will use the funds to study the potential for creating the park.

Coordinated by the City's Department of Planning and Development (DPD), planners will develop an implementation strategy for the park along the north bank of the South Branch of the Chicago River, including access, storm water management, trails, wildlife habitats, overlooks, landscaping, and fishing piers. The plan also will include a construction budget and potential funding sources.

The mayor expects the study's cost to total \$120,000, with the remaining \$80,000 provided through a grant from the Illinois Department of Natural Resources' Coastal Zone Management Program.

Peter Strazzabosco, DPD deputy commissioner for communication and outreach, said, "The site was initially identified as an open space opportunity by the Fisk Re-Use Task Force and further identified in the Pilsen Land Use Strategy. The proposed open space is on only part of the Fisk site. Funding is currently in place for conceptual design and community engagement activities exclusively, both of which are planned to start this fall. Park development costs and timing have yet to be determined."

The study is expected to be completed "by the end of 2017," according to a statement from the Mayor's office.

The Fisk Generating Station ceased operations in August 2012 due to competition from natural gas-fired power plants, opposition to Fisk from community activists, and new environmental regulations soon to take effect. The plant closing came after owner Midwest Generation declined to invest in expensive upgrades to meet federal air standards.

Plant opponents suggested a park at the time, when they were fighting to close Fisk to help rid Pilsen of carbon dioxide emissions and other pollution, which contribute to global warming and endanger nearby residents' health.

Byron Sigcho, from the Pilsen Alliance community group, does not think the project has received enough community input.

"We welcome more green spaces and, in particular, access to the river to Pilsen residents," he said. "However, we continue to be concerned about plans being developed, revised, and approved without residents' participation and involvement. We ask that the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, the Pilsen Land Use Committee, Alderman Danny Solis (25th Ward), and the Department of Planning and Development engage with the community and stop making decisions on the residents' behalf. This plan was never discussed with the community, as many others, and that is a big concern in our community."

Strazzabosco countered by specifying that "there is no plan for a park right now" as "a need for a plan for a possible

park has been determined through years-long outreach efforts with community members through the Fisk Re-Use Task Force and Pilsen and Little Village Action Plan processes as well as other engagement activities.”

Sigcho said, “I never heard of this gentleman, and they have never reached out to us to let us know about any outreach efforts.”

Strazzabosco promised more outreach.

“To help develop a plan for a possible park on a portion of the Fisk site, the Chicago Department of Planning and Development applied for and received a grant from the Illinois Department of Natural Resources,” Strazzabosco said. “The grant will be used this fall to perform more outreach activities with the community to help establish concepts for park amenities and design and ultimately a plan for development.”